

Successful Six Sigma Projects – the Champion’s Role

(Stephen Halliday)

There are several key success factors that must be in place in order to ensure that a Six Sigma project will deliver the expected improvement and returns.

- projects aligned with the business plan
- adequately trained and resourced Black Belts
- senior management commitment to change
- engaged Champions

It is this latter success factor that is the focus here.

It has been seen that failure or difficulties in Six Sigma projects can be traced back to the lack of engagement of the Champion with the Black Belt during the project.

Who should be a Champion?

This aspect is well covered in the books on Six Sigma. The general consensus is that a Champion should be:

- a senior manager who has responsibility for the area in which the Six sigma project is based
- someone who has direct access to other senior managers including the M.D.
- someone who understands and supports the Six Sigma vision
- someone who has the ability and commitment to remove barriers that the team may encounter
- someone who is aware of the tools and techniques used within Six Sigma

The selection of a Champion often covers the first four points and the final point is covered via an overview in the initial training. It is in the implementation of their role as a Champion that difficulties are encountered.

Although Champions are told that their role is critical to the success of the projects, experience shows that once started, they easily overlook the significance of their role.

Below are a number of reasons why Champions may prove to be more of a hindrance than support and encouragement to the Black Belts and certainly fail to drive the Six Sigma projects:

- Champion believes that responsibility for the success of the project lies solely with the Black Belt
- Champion does not formally review the project
- Champion thinks they need to be able to use all the tools
- Champions tell the Black Belt what to do
- Black Belts seen as the key change agent

Incorrect Thinking of Champions

Responsibility for Success lies with the Black Belt

This is a key misunderstanding. It is true that the Black Belt has responsibility for leading the team and using the Six Sigma tools to achieve the project's objectives. However, this is often made difficult because the rest of the organisation do not see the Black Belt's project as being of particular importance to them, after all, they have their own tasks. Although the Black Belt may use their persuasive powers to get others involved, this can be made easier by the work of the Champion who gains agreement from all managers who are likely to be involved that they will allocate time and resource to the project. Too many Black Belts find themselves caught in a no-man's land of office politics, desperately trying to get others to give time to the project. This misunderstanding from Champions was taken to its extreme when one Champion chose a person for Black Belt training, commenting that this was this person's last chance to prove himself. Needless to say this Champion did not do much to help this particular Black Belt.

Reviewing the Project

If a Champion does not review the project then who will? By review too many Champions think this means asking, "How's it going?" as they pass the Black Belt in the corridor. This is a useful and needed question but it should not take the place of a formal review.

One company has drawn up a set of review questions for each Champion to use as a guideline. (see Appendix 1).

It is important that this review is to be completed by the Champion along with the Black Belt and not simply handed to the Black belt for completion. During the review it is important that others with an interest in the project also attend. These may include the Process Owner, if they are not the Champion, the Departmental manager, even someone from Finance who can monitor the real savings.

The use of regular, formal reviews should engage the Champion more and alert them to obstacles that need to be dealt with.

Using all the Tools

It is important that the Champion knows of the concepts and tools of Six Sigma. They must have some knowledge of what is expected otherwise they will focus on the political issues of the organisation rather than creating the environment for the Black Belt and their team. However, it is the Black Belt's responsibility to employ the tools. The key for a Champion is to know the right questions to ask during a review and provide the appropriate support. (see previous section).

Champion tells the Black Belt what to do.

A Champion may believe that, based on their previous experience, they know the best way to approach the Black belt's project. However, it is the Black Belt's project; they have been taught how to run it and follow the DMAIC process.

In a number of situations, Champions have completely redirected Black Belts away from the taught method resulting in little progress being made. In one instance, I visited a Black Belt to see why little progress had been made. During the visit I took the Black belt onto the line to demonstrate some of the data that might be collected. When the Champion heard of what we were doing he came to the line to apologise because the Black Belt had originally said he was going to do what we were now doing and he, the Champion, had disagreed and sent the Black Belt off in a completely different direction.

Black Belts seen as the key Change Agents

Whilst it is true that a competency for a successful Black Belt is to be an agent of change, it is even more critical for the Champion to be a leader of change. If Black Belts and Green Belts are to succeed, the leadership must change the company culture. If Six Sigma is to herald a culture of continuous improvement rather than a one-off attempt to cut costs, this has to be the role of the Champion. The culture will not change if those in senior management believe it is the rest of the organisation that needs to change and not them. Leadership is about demonstrating the behaviours expected of others. Too often one can tell the position of the senior management by looking at those further down the organisation.

Conclusion

The Champion's role is a key factor in achieving successful Six sigma projects. The Champion must be engaged with the Black Belt in an appropriate way, reviewing not directing the project. Being a Champion is not simply a title. It should be seen as a key part of the senior manager's work and as such should be written into their objectives. That is, the Champion not the Black Belt is ultimately responsible for the achievement of the project through the Black Belt and the key driver of change in the culture of the organisation. This will lead to a more engaged Champion with a greater likelihood that the project will achieve its objectives.

Appendix - Review Questions

Define Phase

Does the project have a clear description / statement?
What expected savings have been identified? Have these been agreed with Finance?
What risks to the success of the project have been identified? What steps have been taken to minimise these?
What is critical to deliver the project savings/improvement and success of this project?
Which project management tools have been used?
Has a process map been created?
What measures will be used in the project?
Has a data collection plan been created?
What is described in the Team charter?

Measure Phase

What are the key measures for improvement?
Has the measurement system been checked? What were the results?
What data has been collected?
What is the Sigma value of the current process?
Have any special causes been found? What action has been taken to remove them?
Are the project and financial statements still valid?

Analyse Phase

What analysis is planned for the key measures data?
Have non-value activities been identified?
Were any statistical tests used? If so, which and why?
Is there a clear understanding of the reasons/ root causes of variation?
Have root causes of variation been verified?
Are the project and financial statements still valid?

Improve / Control Phase

What improvement proposals have been identified?
How will the improvements be validated?
Has approval been sought for the improvements?
What standardisation and Poke Yoke is planned?
What are the results of any implementation?
Are the improvements being sustained?
Have any additional opportunities been identified?

Transfer

How are the improvements to be communicated?
Where else at our location should we implement these improvements?
What recognition is planned for the team members?